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SUBJECT: JAPAN RELEASES UPDATED PANDEMIC ACTION PLAN

REF: 08 TOKYO 1214

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1. (SBU) The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) released a draft of the GOJ's updated action plan for pandemic influenza November 28. The revised action plan, according to MHLW officials, incorporates recommendations by the ruling coalition's project team in the Diet on pandemic influenza as well as recent changes to Japan's law on infectious disease control (ref). Key revisions include a pandemic severity scale with five broad categories, simplified from the WHO's present scale of six pandemic stages with two levels per stage. Health Ministry officials said the new scale is more useful for Japan and that WHO too is considering a simplified severity index. The new plan also includes a recommendation to increase Japan's anti-viral stockpile to cover 45 percent of the population, up from the current 25 percent target. Officials did not specify, but said new technical data prompted the upward revision of the target. The MHLW is seeking public comment on the proposal and expects the GOJ to adopt an updated action plan in January 2009.

2. (SBU) Although the new action plan focuses on achieving GOJ goals of limiting the domestic spread of a pandemic and minimizing its effects on the economy and society, MHLW officials played down recent media reports the GOJ is now shifting emphasis away from measures to contain a pandemic at Japan's borders. They argue GOJ pandemic planning has long been based on the fundamental idea that a pandemic cannot be fully contained. They add the updated measures to limit the spread of the disease were developed after specific changes to the infectious disease law and as a result of project team recommendations. Officials also report MHLW recently hired media experts and health professionals as part of a new group to develop and promote pandemic countermeasures.

3. (SBU) Acknowledging little change to policy on vaccine development and allocation, MHLW officials said any new

recommendations are likely to come after March 2009 when the GOJ should have the initial results of clinical studies on 6,000 frontline workers inoculated with pre-pandemic vaccine.

The GOJ hopes to explore cell-based vaccine production beginning in 2009 and, MHLW officials note, would welcome cooperation with the U.S. on developing cell-based techniques.

¶4. (SBU) On Japan's medical capacity, MHLW officials pointed out Japan has 593 hospitals with 11,231 beds designated for patients with diseases such as tuberculosis (TB), SARS, and severe influenza. Given the low rates of TB in Japan, 60 percent of these hospital beds could be available to treat patients in a pandemic, according to officials. Note: Separately, local government officials and medical professionals involved in health emergency planning have raised concerns about Japan's hospital capacity in a pandemic. While the Japanese health system generally gets high marks, the recent case of a pregnant woman who died after being turned away from several Tokyo hospitals has exposed some weak links in Japan's capacity to handle patients requiring specialized treatment. End Note.
ZUMWALT